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Isles of Boshen : Edward Lear's literary nonsense in context

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Abstract

This thesis investigates three major areas in the background of Edward Lear's literary nonsense: the parodic relationship with text and genre of early children's literary trends behind Lear's innovative illustration style, and the "nonsense" child construct manifest within the genre, which I claim is, in many ways, an expression of the Romantic conception of the child.

The first chapter explores the parodic basis of nonsense. Most literary nonsense is referential; it often begins by inhabiting a genre or individual work, but what it does original is debatable. Some critics see nonsense as parody, while others claim that nonsense precludes parody in its intentional purposelessness. In this chapter I explore the critical debate surrounding parody in nonsense, and parody in general. I then examine the works of Lear, and some Carroll, looking first at their genuine, clear parody. Next, I look at the many borderline cases of parody which use nonsense as a device but are not overshadowed by it. Finally, I discuss the more "pure" literary nonsense which, I argue, goes beyond parody to establish a new genre.

The next chapter looks at the background of Lear's nonsense illustration. His style of illustration was a widely original combination of devices which are best seen in the context of the children's book illustrations of his day. With Bewick's innovations in woodcuts, the quality of children's illustrations had drastically improved. Diverging from this trend, Lear's illustrations harken back to the rough chapbooks which he probably read as a child. His child-like style, coupled with an expert draughtsman's eye, a rival tradition of children's book illustration. His illustrations are in way caricatures of chapbooks. His text and illustrations, like those of Blake and Hood, are integral to their self-reflexiveness with the verses places them in an altogether different class of illustration.

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